



Why Attendance Matters in Early Education Programs

Study after study confirms the value of high-quality early childhood education for developing the cognitive, social and emotional skills that children need to succeed in kindergarten. But unless children attend these programs on a regular basis, they are not likely to benefit fully. And unless we pay attention to attendance even among young children, we are missing the opportunity to use early educational experiences to build an essential skill: showing up on time, every day to school. A growing body of research and practitioner experience shows that paying attention to attendance for our youngest children is essential.

Why does attendance matter for young students?

✓ Absenteeism starts early.

- One in 10 kindergarten and first grade students nationwide misses 10 % of the school year in excused and unexcused absences.¹ The limited data on preschool attendance show even higher rates of chronic absenteeism. In Washington, D.C. 27% of 3- and 4-year-olds were chronically absent.² In Chicago, 45% of 3-year-olds and more than a third of 4-year-olds missed that much school.³

✓ Early attendance can predict attendance in the later years.

- Chronic absence in preschool and kindergarten can predict who will miss too much school later. In Chicago, children chronically absent in preschool were five times more likely to miss too much kindergarten.⁴ An Oregon study found that children who were chronically absent in kindergarten and first grade had the lowest levels of attendance five years later.⁵ A national study of kindergarten students found that those who attended regularly were more likely to develop the social-emotional skills that helped them persevere in school.⁶

✓ Early attendance can help children learn to read and succeed in school.

- Literacy instruction is frontloaded in the early grades, so if children miss too much school, they lag behind classmates in reading. Tulsa preschoolers who attended regularly showed more growth in literacy skills than those who were frequently absent.⁷ Likewise the Chicago research showed that students who arrived at pre-K with the weakest reading skills and attended regularly saw the biggest gains.⁸ A quarter of the Baltimore students who were chronically absent in preK and kindergarten were retained in a later grade, compared to 9% of those who attended regularly.⁹

✓ Children from low-income families are more likely to be chronically absent and more likely to be affected by the lost instructional time.

- Given the challenges that poverty can create for getting to school, low-income children are four times more likely to be chronically absent.¹⁰ Unfortunately, because they are more likely to depend upon school to learn to read, the adverse impact on literacy development is 75% greater for these children than for their middle class peers.¹¹ For low-income children, early chronic absence correlates with the worst achievement levels in fifth grade.

What can early childhood programs, schools and community partners do?

Programs can make consistent, on-time attendance a highly visible part of the environment. Posters, jingles, contests and recognition make on-time attendance something children and parents strive for. Rather than using attendance data to push students out after too many absences, programs can use the information as a tool to identify challenges and salute progress.

✓ Pay attention to attendance

- Track absences with an eye on how many students are missing too many days, not just how many show up every day. Look for patterns among students and in times of the week or year. A Baltimore study found preK and kindergarten absences were concentrated in certain neighborhoods and schools, suggesting the need for deeper, more targeted intervention. In Montgomery County, Md., pre-K programs share data with elementary school principals.

✓ Use attendance records to identify and reach out to at-risk children and their families early in the school year

- Once children miss 10% of school days (that can be as little as two days a month), reach out to the families to tell them you are concerned about the situation and to offer support. Find out if they face any barriers to attendance, such as illness, transportation problems or housing instability. D.C.'s preschool program saw its chronic absence rate drop by 13% when providers changed their practice from only calling parents when students had three absences in a row to reaching out after any three absences, even if they weren't consecutive. In Tulsa, preschool providers create Attendance Improvement Action Plans for children with too many absences. Addressing chronic absence is an ideal opportunity for collaborating with community agencies that have the staff and resources to support families.

✓ Educate parents about what children learn in the early years and why attendance matters

- Make sure parents understand what children are learning in early education programs and kindergarten and recognize their responsibility for ensuring regular attendance. In Baltimore, students who went to Head Start had better attendance than their peers in kindergarten and first grade, in part because of the intensive parent outreach in the program. Abriendo Puertas builds attendance into games, pledge cards and handouts for its comprehensive 10-week curriculum for Latino parents.

✓ Make children part of the solution

- Use incentives and games to encourage children to show up. Perfectly Punctual provides materials that allow children to fill out attendance cards and honors them weekly for perfect on-time attendance. In Lee County, Fla., children sing at circle time to those students who are absent and receive monthly certificates.

✓ Increase access to health resources

- Especially among young children, health concerns lead to absences. Asthma accounts for an estimated 12.3 million absences nationally each year. Dental problems, colds, even head lice and separation anxiety can also keep children home. Offering access to health resources can make a significant dent. In Santa Clara, Calif., attendance was higher for poor children who had health insurance.¹² A nurse practitioner in North Carolina found she could make a measurable difference by calling parents to connect them to health resources and educate them about avoiding unnecessary absences.¹³

Notes

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4 Ehrlich

5 Oregon report

6 Gottfried, Michael A. (in press). Chronic Absenteeism and Its Effects on Students' Academic and Socioemotional Outcomes. Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk.

7 Community Action Project Tulsa County. Attendance Works Peer Learning Network Webinar. February 27, 2012.

8 Ehrlich

9 Early Elementary Performance and Attendance in Baltimore City Schools' Pre-Kindergarten and Kindergarten, Baltimore Education Research Consortium. March 2012

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11 Ready, Douglas D., Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development, The Differential Effects of School Exposure, Sociology of Education, October 2010.

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